

VZCZCXRO5981  
RR RUEHBZ RUEH DU RUEHGI RUEHJO RUEHMA RUEHMR RUEHPA RUEHRN RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHYD #0825/01 2711503  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 281503Z SEP 09  
FM AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0306  
INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE  
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 04 YAOUNDE 000825

STATE FOR AF/C AND DRL  
PARIS AND LONDON FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

SIPDIS  
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/W  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [CASC](#) [CM](#)  
SUBJECT: A VISIT TO CAMEROON'S PRISONS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Embassy Yaounde's Political Specialist recently visited the prisons of Douala New Bell, in the Littoral Region, and Buea and Kumba in the South West Region. These three prisons often top the headlines because of violence, revolts, and escape attempts. Douala's prison is dismal and terribly overcrowded. The most pressing problems across the board are a lack of infrastructure, overcrowding, promiscuity and health challenges such as HIV/AIDS. These prisons lack the most basic infrastructure, and prisoners must rely on family members to provide many necessities. This message details the situation in the three visited prisons. The Minister of Justice and penitentiary and judicial authorities were receptive to our visit and hoped for future collaboration with the USG. End summary.

Prisons: Three Samples  
-----

¶2. (U) Douala New Bell: New Bell was a former military camp that the colonial administration turned into a prison with a capacity of 700 detainees. Today, it holds 2,813 inmates, including 395 convicts, 2,266 pre-trial detainees and 149 detainees undergoing an appeal process. Among the inmates, 60 are minors and 49 are women. Pretrial detainees and convicts are mixed together. A staff of 150 people, including guards, is responsible for the prison. Many prisoners run businesses, including "restaurants," barbershops, and "general stores" that sell basics such as soap and canned food. Living conditions have historically been so harsh that the Cameroonian NGO Action of Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT) has called New Bell a "dehumanization center." Some new construction at the complex will ease conditions for a portion of the population (see para 5.)

¶3. (U) Buea: This decrepit colonial-era prison has eight cellblocks, one dormitory for minors, and one dormitory for women. With an initial capacity for 200 inmates, it now has 420. One hundred are convicts and 320 are pretrial detainees, including six women and twenty-four minors. Prison conditions are inadequate. Two of the eight cells are reserved for pretrial detainees. Fifty prison workers, including guards, take care of the 420 prisoners. All roofs leak greatly when it rains, causing particular suffering during the rainy season. Because there is little shelter, inmates gather their beds in corners where there is less leakage. In one building, the ceiling was covered with plastic buckets that inmates had hung to catch water leaks.

¶4. (U) Kumba: The Kumba prison facilities are slightly better than in Douala and Buea. The buildings are part of the colonial heritage, but have had some maintenance over the years. The seventy-seven year old prison was built for 200 prisoners. Today, the prison holds 481 inmates, including 242 pretrial detainees (221 men, 4 women, and 17 minors). There are 239 convicts (181 men, 10 women, 9 minors). This population includes 39 foreigners, mostly Nigerians. Minors and women live in separate quarters. Pretrial detainees are separated from convicts. Forty prison workers, including guards, take care of the 481 prisoners.

## Living conditions

-----

15. (U) Room and Board: In New Bell prison, the sixty-one minors have moved into their new facilities. The forty-nine women will soon be moving from a temporary building into a new facility, once their beds are ordered. At the moment, all men live under "tents" made out of plastic sheets. They sleep on two, three, or four-story homemade bunk beds. These beds are constructed from pieces of plywood, which are held together with rubber inner tubes. Cardboard boxes serve as mattresses. Restrooms do not meet even minimum sanitary standards. Tremendous overcrowding means that a significant number of detainees must live outside, rain or shine. The "VIP corner" (former ministers, former general managers of public corporations, and some former high profile civil servants) is better than the rest of the prison, with a dormitory and six individual cells. In the Buea prison, a majority of prisoners have one or two story wooden or iron beds. In some cells, there is only one single bed for two detainees. Detainees without beds sleep on "mattresses" or synthetic rugs that are placed underneath a bed. The situation is not much different in Kumba where detainees also share beds or sleep on the floor.

16. (U) Food and Water: Conditions in Douala have recently improved due to an increase in the food budget. Prisoners now receive two meals per day. Many inmates look malnourished, with bony cheeks and protruding eyes. The prison diet is composed of corn, beans, rice, and peanut sauce, all mixed with palm oil. In the Kumba prison, the administration occasionally adds in vegetables and smoked fish, if the food budget allows. The prisoners themselves prepare their food, under the supervision of wardens. Families of prisoners can bring cooked food, which has to be tasted by family members before

YAOUNDE 00000825 002 OF 004

it can be served to the prisoner or they can bring uncooked food that the prisoner can cook himself. Running water is available in Douala and Buea, but in Kumba water is stored in tanks.

17. (U) Bathrooms: In New Bell prison, "bathrooms" are very narrow rooms with no doors for privacy. All the latrine pits are overloaded, and when it rains there is overflow which spreads all over the prison yard. The odor is pervasive throughout. In the Buea prison, each of the eight cellblocks has a bathroom. In the Kumba prison, there is a very simple courtyard where prisoners can take bucket baths. In all three prisons, women and minors have their own bathrooms.

## Health

-----

18. (U) There is an infirmary in each of the three prisons. New Bell has eight beds, Buea three, and Kumba one. The New Bell prison has one permanently posted medical doctor and five nurses. The Buea prison has one permanently posted medical doctor and one nurse. The Kumba prison has a senior nurse who takes care of patients. The Kumba prison warden recently signed an agreement with the Saint Francis Clinic, a private hospital, for pro bono consultations and treatment. For serious cases, prisoners at all three prisons can be transferred to a hospital, provided that the family pays for transportation, medical appointments and any needed medicine. As three wardens noted, many prisoners have no one to cover such costs and as a result there are occasional deaths due to the lack of advanced medical treatment (although no case was reported in any of the prisons in 2009).

19. (U) The availability of drugs remains an issue, although basic drugs (painkillers, anti-malarials) are available in limited quantities. In New Bell, the total budget for pharmaceuticals is \$5,000. The Douala Archdiocese provides drugs to treat tuberculosis, while the German development agency GTZ provides testing and drugs for HIV/AIDS patients. To make more drugs available and at cheaper prices, the Kumba prison warden also recently signed an agreement with a private pharmacy. Diarrhea, skin diseases and tuberculosis are the primary illnesses seen in the prisons. HIV/AIDS is increasingly becoming a serious issue. All three wardens noted that they had several people living with

HIV/AIDS in their penitentiaries. None were able to provide post with any statistics, citing confidentiality concerns. Tuberculosis-infected patients are isolated from the other prisoners.

#### Relaxation

¶10. (U) Entertainment: In all three prisons, there were television sets, CD players, stereos, and DVDs in cells or open spaces. The detainees can listen to music and watch television programs of their choice, without any restrictions. They can also watch movies, without any censorship. This may change in the Kumba prison in the near future as the warden feels that violent television programs or movies should be limited, but no formal decision has been made. Of the three prisons, Kumba is the only place where prisoners have a sports field. Buea is the only prison with a library, which is well attended.

#### Other Critical Issues

¶11. (U) Criminality: Prisons, especially New Bell, harbor an underworld, and extortion and harassment are reportedly common. "Anti-gangs" (some of the heavily-sentenced convicts) are the bosses inside the prison. They control facilities such as beds and bathrooms and extort money from prisoners who wish to use them. There are occasional violent outbreaks when a group of prisoners rejects subjugation.

¶12. (SBU) Corruption: Corruption is also rampant in the prisons. Wardens are often the initiators of such corruption. In Buea for instance, the State Counsel told post about a warden who collected money from a detainee with the promise that he would help accelerate the processing of his file. The prosecutor demanded that the detainee be reimbursed, and gave the warden a warning. The warden continues to work at the prison.

¶13. (U) Transportation: The New Bell prison has received two new trucks for the transportation of detainees to and from court, but the Buea and Kumba prisons function without a single vehicle. Wardens walk with detainees to and from the courthouse. For those detainees who have family members who can afford it, the penitentiary administration calls a taxi to take the detainee and the warders to court. For the most dangerous prisoners, both the administrative personnel and warders contribute money to rent a

YAOUNDE 00000825 003 OF 004

taxi. The fact that wardens walk city streets with prisoners exposes them to potential assaults by the accomplices of the very dangerous prisoners (who are afraid the prisoner might testify against them), by persons holding a grudge against the accused, or by accomplices helping the prisoner escape. Various officials told Poloff that they had to cancel planned vehicular transfers of dangerous prisoners to the courthouse due to lack of money and vehicles, thus forcing courts to adjourn cases.

#### Other prison practices

¶14. (U) Constrained detention: This term refers to those prisoners who are kept in jail after serving their prison term because they have not been able to pay the fines and/or damages that were part of their sentence. Although none of the three wardens was able to give specific numbers, New Bell officials estimated they had dozens of such cases, while Buea and Kumba had just a few. In Douala, the nongovernmental organization Action of Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT) estimated that there are approximately one hundred such cases. Minors and seniors above sixty years of age are released, even if they have not been able to pay these fines. The prison administration acts under the judiciary branch, which argues that such constrained detention is the sole manner to ensure all fines and damages are paid.

¶15. (U) Administrative detentions: In order to maintain public order and fight crime, the administrative authority (Governor or

Prefet) has the power to order the arrest and detention of an individual for a period of fifteen days, with one possible extension. This legal provision has resulted in abuses by some authorities, as we have documented in previous human rights reporting. The New Bell prison was the only place where such detainees (about fifty) were found. These fifty detainees, ranging from students to prostitutes, had been detained for about two months at the time of Pol Specialist's visit to the prison. The Prefet of Wouri Division ordered their administrative detention, following their arrest during a neighborhood sweep. The New Bell Prison warden expressed his frustration with having such detainees and on the morning of Pol Specialist's visit to the prison, he had just had a meeting with the Prefet to demand their release. The Douala prosecutor, when asked about these administrative detainees, said that administrative detention was a prerogative of the territorial command administration and that the judiciary could do nothing. He added that the judiciary could intervene if the concerned filed a complaint against the administrative officer who ordered his/her detention.

#### Reintegration programs

-----

¶16. (U) Education of minors: The three prisons that post visited had a classroom for the education of minors. Teachers were fellow detainees, who may or may not have been trained teachers.

¶17. (U) Vocational training: Only Buea and Kumba run reintegration programs to teach vocational skills. In Buea, male prisoners can learn poultry and plantain farming techniques. Women can be trained as seamstresses, in collaboration with local professionals. The European Union will soon be sponsoring masonry and carpentry classes in Buea. In Kumba, there are three sewing machines to train inmates. Prisoners can also learn to grow pigs through a program with the Divisional Delegation of Fisheries, Cattle-breeding, and Animal Industries. After their release, prisoners who participate in this program will receive two pigs (male and female) to start a business. Prisoners in Kumba can also learn to make handicrafts such as market bags. Because of limited funds at all three prisons, the number of prisoners who can participate in vocational training programs is very limited.

#### Pre- and Post-trial Follow-up

-----

¶18. (U) During the visit of the Buea and Kumba prisons, pol specialist was startled by the number of inmates who followed the visiting group, which included the State Counsel. Many of the detainees wanted to voice their grievances to the State Counsel. The role of the State Counsel is to make sure that the rights of prisoners (processing of files, issuance of convocations for hearings in courts, etc.) are guaranteed and respected. For this reason, he/she is required by law to regularly visit prisons. The State Counsel also has the right to delegate this function to assistants, but in this case assistants apparently had not been fulfilling their job responsibilities, as many prisoners had never met with State Counsel staff. One example was the case of a police officer who had been detained since February 2007 for the unauthorized use of his gun during the student riots at the University of Buea. The State Counsel noted that he was surprised

YAOUNDE 00000825 004 OF 004

to hear so many complaints as he sends his assistants to the prison every week in order to monitor all cases. He promised to return in order to devote more time to those in need of his action and the power of his authority. Post has since learned that he fulfilled his promise by returning to the prison, and he has also been investigating assistants for not fulfilling their job responsibilities.

¶19. (U) The follow-up of detainees' files is a critical issue. Detainees who can afford a lawyer are always aware of their case's progress (dates and times of appearance before the instructing magistrate or the court, date of release, etc). For the rest, cases are occasionally lost in the bureaucratic shuffle for years. Post learned that it is common for detainees to miss several hearings on

their case simply because they were not informed of the hearings. The State Counsel for the Douala High Court told post that this situation is unfortunate, but that the ongoing computerization of courts and prisons should reduce this problem. Under the computerized system, once the instructing magistrate has forwarded the detainee's file to a judge, this information will automatically appear in the prison's computer. The prison administration would likewise be automatically informed when the judge sets a trial date, thus ensuring adequate advance notice to arrange for the prisoner's transfer to the courthouse. The Ministry of Justice, with financial and technical assistance from the Commonwealth, hopes to complete the computerization process in 2012.

#### GRC Wants to Improve

¶20. (SBU) The GRC acknowledges its prison problems and has asked the Embassy for help in improving the situation. In January 2009, Vice Prime Minister and Minister of Justice Amadou Ali provided post with his ministry's action plan to improve conditions in Cameroon's prisons, including the New Bell, Buea and Kumba prisons. Among other things, the plan calls for refurbishing New Bell prison, constructing a new central prison in Douala, and purchasing two trucks. Some of those projects have already been implemented, but most improvements have moved slowly, ostensibly because of budget constraints.

#### Comment

¶21. (SBU) The Minister of Justice granted Embassy Yaounde immediate, unprecedented access to the prisons, with only 48 hours notice, and he seemed genuinely interested in a readout after the visits. Pol Specialist was able to inspect all corners of the prison, and felt that little "make-ready" had been done before his arrival. The prison situation is one of Cameroon's major human rights challenges and has been highlighted in several post human rights reports over the past few years. We will continue to engage the government, NGO activists and other donor partners to improve prisons and will look for ways to materially support the GRC in its prison reform efforts. Post is not aware of any American citizens detained in these facilities. End comment.

Peterson